

Jonah-A Study In Serving God

Chapter 3

In our last study we learnt about the repentance of Jonah and the calling on the great fish that God had “*appointed*” to secure the salvation of the prophet from a watery grave. We also saw the significance of God's calling in our lives even in the seemingly mundane tasks we are asked to carry out.

Now, having vomited Jonah out “*upon the dry land*” we pick up the narrative in chapter three.

Verses 1-5

The chapter opens with God calling Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh to preach against it. This illustrates for us the grace of God in our repentance. When God forgives He also forgets our transgressions as He tells us in Isaiah 43:25, “*I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.*” This time instead of running away Jonah obeys God's command and goes to Nineveh which was not just a great city, chosen as the capital of the Assyrian empire, but it was “*an exceedingly great city*”. This is verified by ancient writers who describe Nineveh as four hundred and eighty stadia in circumference (DIODORUS SICULUS, 2.3). A stadia is an ancient Greek and Roman unit of length, the Athenian unit being equal to about 607 feet (185 metres). A mile is 5,280 feet; therefore, a mile would equal 8.6985 stadia. This means that Nineveh was approx. 16.8 miles in circumference. Although archeological exploration has shown that the city was between seven and eight miles in circumference, the term “*that great city*” could refer to the region known as 'Greater Nineveh' which was a region that included the cities of Rehoboth-Ir, Calah and Resen (see Gen. 10:11-12).

The vastness of the city is again highlighted by Jonah going a day's journey into the city (Vs.4). A day's journey was eighteen to twenty miles, bearing in mind that Jonah was sent to preach to the city he may have stopped on occasion to preach God's message to the people. Vs.5 tells us that as Jonah walked and preached “*the people of Nineveh believed God.*” Their repentance is swift and the people immediately respond to God's message by calling a fast and putting on sackcloth. The extent of their repentance reached through all the social classes “*from the greatest of them to the least*” we are told in Vs.5.

Verses 6-10

When God's message reaches the king he too covers himself in sackcloth and sits in ashes. Sackcloth and ashes were used in O. T. times as a symbol of debasement, mourning, and/or repentance. Someone wanting to show his repentant heart would often wear sackcloth, sit in ashes, and put ashes on top of his head. Sackcloth was a coarse material usually made of black goat's hair, and was uncomfortable to wear. The ashes signified desolation and ruin.

When someone died, the act of putting on sackcloth showed heartfelt sorrow for the loss of that person. We see an example of this when David mourned the death of Abner, the commander of Saul's army (2 Sam. 3:31). Jacob also demonstrated his grief by wearing sackcloth when he thought his son, Joseph, has been killed (Gen. 37:34). These instances of mourning for the dead mention sackcloth but not ashes. Ashes accompanied sackcloth in times of national disaster or repenting from sin, as we see in the narrative here. Esther 4:1, for instance, describes Mordecai tearing his clothes, putting on sackcloth and ashes. This was Mordecai's reaction to King Xerxes' declaration giving the wicked Haman authority to destroy the Jews (see Esther 3:8-15). The Jews responded to the devastating news concerning their race with sackcloth and ashes, showing their intense grief and distress (Esther 4:3).

At Nineveh the king also publishes a proclamation to be read throughout the city. Their repentance was so sincere that the king orders that they even put sackcloth on their animals (Vs.8). His reasoning was, “*Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger so that we may not perish*” (Vs.9).

This is interesting because the Bible doesn't say that Jonah's message included any mention of God's mercy; but mercy is in fact what they received. It's clear that their wearing of sackcloth and ashes was not a meaningless show. God saw genuine change, a humble change of heart represented by the sackcloth and ashes, and it caused Him to "relent" and not bring about His plan to destroy them.

How are we to understand God "relenting"? Does this mean that God changed His mind, or that the people's actions caused God to deviate from His plans? No, when the Bible talks of God's actions it does so in anthropomorphic terms. That is to say that it ascribes human behaviours to God so that we can understand Him better and the actions He takes. The change in God's actions here does not imply that there is a change in His sovereign will. God's apparent change of mind is completely compatible with His sovereignty because He ordains the means as well as the ends. To explain this further see Jer. 18:7-10. Here we can see that God's judgement is never taken by surprise. He knows the human heart and makes allowances for the human reaction. Whatever the outcome of any given situation, God's sovereign will is never undermined. His will is perfect and will withstand any reaction from us, so when we read that God "changes His mind" it is purely for our benefit in order to understand God's actions. A further illustration is given here in Jonah's narrative, sackcloth and ashes were used as an outward sign of the people's inward condition. Such a symbol made one's change of heart visible and demonstrated the sincerity of one's grief and/or repentance. It was not the act of putting on sackcloth and ashes itself that moved God to intervene, but the humility that such an action demonstrated (see 1 Sam. 16:7).

This is true for us also, although we don't use sackcloth and ashes, a truly repentant heart will gain the favour of God's grace and forgiveness.